

# THE GLOBE AND MAIL

**HD** COP26 summit tackles gender issues in climate change

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**WC** 1,024 words

**PD** 9 November 2021

**SN** The Globe and Mail (Breaking News)

**SC** GMBN

**LA** English

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Delegates said issues affecting women should be integrated into the entire proceedings

Standing 3.5-metres tall, Little Amal was hard to miss as she strode into one of the main conference rooms at the UN COP26 climate summit on Tuesday.

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The giant puppet, created by the South African puppeteers behind the play War Horse, depicts a Syrian refugee, and she recently completed an 8,000-kilometre trek to Britain from Turkey to raise awareness about the plight of migrants.

She made her appearance at COP26 on a day organizers had set aside to discuss the impact of climate change on women and girls. After Amal handed a bag of seeds to Samoan climate activist Brianna Fruean, Ms. Fruean called on delegates "to work and fight so that all little girls inherit the world that they deserve, to lay the foundation for change to grow."

Despite Amal's colourful presence and Ms. Fruean's passionate pitch, many delegates fear the rallying cry will fall on deaf ears at the summit. Climate campaigners have described this as the most exclusive COP summit ever. And walking around the hallways of the Scottish Event Campus it's hard not to see this as a largely white, male gathering.

A report released last month by the United Nations said that while more women have been included in decision-making panels at the annual COP summit, "male overrepresentation on constituted bodies and on government delegations still remains an issue of concern."

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The recent study by the University of Bristol found that men speak twice as frequently as women during climate conferences. "Participation in climate change decision making is heavily skewed toward white men, especially in terms of number of times spoken," it concluded.

The British delegation at COP26 illustrates the concern many campaigners share. Britain is the official host of the event and a year ago just two of the 12 people named to leadership team organizing the summit were women. The composition eventually changed and more women have been included, but only after a public outcry. Even now the top tier are men, including COP26 president Alok Sharma and the U.K.'s top negotiator, Archie Young.

Some delegates saw the designation of a "gender day" on Tuesday as part of the problem, and said that issues affecting women should be integrated into the entire proceedings. "Shouldn't the focus be, why do we have to have a day?," asked Panganga Pungowiya a COP26 delegate from Alaska. "It shouldn't be, this is the designated compartmentalized day that we're going to recognize gender."

There's little doubt that women are more affected by climate change globally than men. Research by the UN has found that 80 per cent of people displaced by climate change are women. "Women tend to be overly burdened with household work and caring for children, the sick and the elderly," the report said. "For example, during the Asian tsunami in 2004 - 70 per cent of the victims were women - many women and children were trapped inside their homes while most men were out in the open."

To be sure, Tuesday's meeting at COP26 was filled with important contributions from many heavy hitters, including Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. And several countries, including Canada, announced significant pledges to address climate change and inequality. Patricia Fuller, Canada's Climate Change ambassador, said Canada will aim 80 per cent of the \$5.3-billion the government has committed in its international climate pledge toward projects that target gender equality. "Climate action cannot be effective without the full participation of women," Ms. Fuller said.

Ms. Pelosi told delegates that addressing climate change was a matter of "justice and equality." She added: "If I ruled the world, the one thing that I would do is invest in the education of women. When women succeed, the world succeeds."

But outside the conference room several delegates said COP26 leaders had failed for years in putting words into action and they saw little new from Tuesday's discussion. "We are not making the direct action that's needed," said Patricia Roy, a delegate from Uganda who works with a charity called Dan Church Aid. "We shouldn't be making wonderful statements here and then we're not practical on the ground."

There's also a new movement of young climate activists - led largely by women - that's grown impatient with summits such as COP. Women were at the forefront of two massive climate marches held in Glasgow last week and they made up most of the speakers at a pair of rallies. Many reflected the views of Swedish activist Greta Thunberg who dismissed COP26 as "a two-week-long celebration of business as usual and blah, blah, blah."

Alix Dietzel, a lecturer in global ethics at the University of Bristol who worked on the gender study, has been impressed to see women leading climate activism. But their role, she said, could be because the environment is viewed as a feminine issue. "Not to disparage at all the women who are doing this amazing work and how awesome it is to see that, but I wonder whether it's still seen like a softer issue," she said. "They are there to have their voices heard a bit but they are not part of the negotiations."

Margareta Koltai, a delegate from Sweden with the ACT Alliance, a global faith-based coalition, said the growing activism of Ms. Thunberg and others has helped ratchet up the pressure on world leaders. "The important thing is that youth and women cannot be part of a one-day program," she said. The young activists represent "a new type of leadership," she added. "Let's listen to those girls and women."

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